

Statement of the International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on World Heritage
Item 7 – State of conservation of World Heritage properties

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on World Heritage want to express our serious concern that despite recent improvements to the Operational Guidelines encouraging respect for Indigenous Peoples and human rights, the management of many World Heritage sites continues to be marked by a lack of respect for Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to the land, and a lack of protection of our traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage. Human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples continue to occur unabated in many sites. The World Heritage Convention is in many ways enabling, and sometimes even driving, these violations.

In 2019, due to intense media pressure, WWF commissioned an independent review into grave human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples by eco-guards in and around protected areas supported by WWF, including instances of murder, rape, torture, physical beatings, unlawful arrest and detention, and multiple other types of abuse and intimidation. Notable is the high proportion of World Heritage sites among the eight protected areas that are implicated: five of them are listed as World Heritage sites and another two are on the Tentative List. The implicated World Heritage sites are Salonga, Lobéké, Chitwan and Kaziranga National Parks, and Dzanga Sangha Protected Area.

The independent study makes clear that the underlying cause of the human rights abuses against Indigenous Peoples is the systemic denial of our customary rights to access and use our ancestral lands, territories and resources. Regrettably, the decisions the World Heritage Committee, the Advisory Bodies and UNESCO have in many ways contributed to this denial, and may also have directly contributed to some of the violations described in the study, for instance by encouraging “voluntary relocations” of Indigenous Peoples or by identifying traditional resource use as a threat. A contributing factor is also the fact that all of the implicated World Heritage sites are listed as purely “natural sites”, without an adequate recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to the land in the OUV, and in disregard of our holistic view of our heritage.

We therefore call on the Committee to stop labelling World Heritage sites in Indigenous Peoples’ territories as purely “natural sites”, and to make changes to the wording of the natural criteria, so that the indissoluble bonds between Indigenous Peoples and their lands can be fully and consistently recognized in all sites.

Thank you.